

Epic meals

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The epics of Homer and Hesiod put a surprising amount of emphasis upon eating and drinking. If we look at these scenes in detail, we can see that many of the poems' central themes are played out over the dinner table.

You are what you eat

The *Iliad*'s heroes eat meat as ravenously as the lions, boars, and wolves with whom they are often compared, if more sociably. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's suitors and the Phaeacians can also eat meat at leisure. No hero touches fruit. This contrasts with most Greeks of Homer's time, who rarely if ever ate meat outside the feasts which followed sacrifices at many public rituals.

Even Homer's language acknowledges this: several traditional expressions label humans as 'grain-eating'. These expressions offer examples of how traditional phrases can be perfectly adapted to a given context. When Odysseus first describes the Cyclops Polyphemus to his audience, he says 'He was a monstrous marvel, and didn't resemble any grain-eating man, but a woody ridge amid high hills'. Indeed, Polyphemus *isn't* a grain-eater: he eats Odysseus' companions. Thankfully, nor is he a practised wine-drinker, so Odysseus is able to get him blind drunk, blind him, and escape.

Similarly, Odysseus twice 'sent companions to go and find out what kind of grain-eating men lived in the land'; both times, they discovered to their surprise that the society didn't eat grain. The Laestrygonians, like Polyphemus, eat Odysseus' men. The Lotus-eaters offer benevolent hospitality, but are still a danger, since their vegetarian food is so addictive that it nearly distracts the men from their nostalgia for Ithaca.

In fact, eating is a recurrent motif in nearly all the far-flung adventures which Odysseus narrates in books 9–12. One reason for the poet to insert this pattern is that eating was fundamental to hospitality, which is a major theme of the *Odyssey*. And Odysseus has a very specific reason to focus on hospitality here: while he tells these stories, he is enjoying a generous welcome from his Phaeacian audience. There is an implicit contrast between his civilized Phaeacian hosts and the cannibalistic subjects of his story.

Another interesting case of eating as hospitality is the meeting with Circe. Odysseus' scouts find beasts who, uncannily, are not aggressive but fawn as dogs do when their master leaves the dinner-table – the wild predators want to be hand-fed. The culmination of these references to eating is that Circe gives the men a strange meal (poisoned bread and a cocktail, rather than meat and wine), turns them into pigs, and feeds them acorns until Odysseus, with divine help, can threaten her into restoring them. Thereafter, Circe is a model hostess.

However, food is not just about hospitality. The diets of Polyphemus and the Lotus-eaters mark their entire cultures as strange and non-Greek, just as the heroes' carnivorous diet shows their difference from normal Greeks. Odysseus' last adventure demonstrates this from another angle. After his men are forced through hunger to hunt for fish and birds – desperate measures for a hero – and eventually to kill some of the sun-

god's sacred cattle, Zeus sends a thunderstorm to punish their impiety. (Note that eating is here driving the plot.) Only Odysseus survives, and he is looked after by the nymph Calypso, who feeds him on 'all the food which mortal men eat, whereas she sat opposite divine Odysseus, and her servants laid out nectar and ambrosia for her'. Men and nymphs need different food.

Is supersizing heroic?

The generation of heroes not only had greater spirits than humans today, but also had greater stomachs. In fact, early Greeks seem to have thought of the spirit (*thumos*) as similar to other organs of the body, and in particular as forming a contrasting pair with the stomach. But in any case, within epic it is not a simple correlation of the more meat, the more heroic. One must know when to stop.

Penelope's suitors are 'idle bellies' (to use a Greek insult) rather than true heroes, as we see when their feast in *Odyssey* 21 becomes their massacre in book 22. The first sign of their lack of heroism is that they cannot string Odysseus' bow. Odysseus strings it easily and plucks it, like a lyre-player. But whereas the lyre-player Demodocus had performed songs about battles at the feasts of Phaeacia, Odysseus' 'performance' at this feast will be a battle itself. He next declares 'It's high time for dinner to be ready for the Greeks while it is light, and later for other entertainment too, with singing and the lyre', in other words 'Eat this, suckers, and listen to your screams and my twanging bowstring.'

The first victim is Antinous, who was 'about to pick up a goblet ... and was wielding it in his hands so that he could drink some wine. The thought of slaughter hadn't entered him'. The verb 'wielding' is important here: just a few lines before it was used twice of Odysseus expertly handling the bow. The arrow enters Antinous' throat, instead of the wine; the only red liquid mentioned now is the blood spurting from his nostrils. Symbolically, the poet focuses in on the cup falling from Antinous' hand, and the bread and meat being dirtied on the floor as he knocks over his table: the party is over; while the suitors were so busy feasting, Odysseus has been laying his trap.

Odysseus here has come a long way since his first adventure after leaving Troy. Then, he and his men plundered the land of the Cicones, and sat on the beach feasting for so long that the Cicones could rally and launch a lethal counter-attack.

That epic hints at the danger of over-consuming was glossed over by later epic parodies, which often pick up on the heroic appetite and describe astronomical gastronomy and drinking-bouts. In the fourth century B.C., for example, a poet called Matro deliciously turned the *Odyssey*'s first line from 'Muse, tell me of the man of many recourses, who [was buffeted] a huge amount' into his first line: 'Muse tell me of the dinners of many courses [*polutropha* instead of *polutropon*] and huge amounts'.

Prometheus and human food

Homer depicts the heroic diet, measured against that of gods, normal men, and exotic non-Greeks. The other main early epic poet, Hesiod, gives a subtle account of how gods and humans came to eat different food.

It was not always so. In the golden age, men (there were no women yet) lived in eternal youth, did no work, and dined with the gods. Zeus had to divide up the roles in the universe he now controlled, and asked Prometheus for some help in distinguishing gods and men. Prometheus, who was secretly on the men's side, decided to do it by carving the beef at a communal meal. He enclosed the best steaks inside the stomach, and the bones inside some juicy-looking fat which looked far more appetising. Zeus saw that he was being tricked, and said with a wry smile 'My dear chap, how unfairly you've carved.' Prometheus didn't realize that Zeus was on to him: 'Just choose whichever you prefer.' Zeus willingly selected the bones, and from then on at most Greek sacrifices the bones wrapped in fat were burnt as the gods' portion, while men got to eat meat. To punish Prometheus and the humans whom he helped, Zeus hid fire – now the mortals couldn't cook their steaks anyway – and enclosed the seeds of food in the earth: the golden age ends, and humans have to work to produce their daily bread. However, Prometheus stole back fire, enclosing the seeds of it in a hollow fennel-stalk. Finally, Zeus' *coup de grâce*: the gods jointly create the first woman, Pandora, enclosing all sorts of mischief within her delectable exterior. They send her to Prometheus' dull-witted brother Epimetheus, who is delighted. But Pandora has a jar which encloses all human illnesses: she opens it and they escape into the human world.

At the end of this chess-game of enclosing one thing inside another, the human condition has been knocked out of parallel with the divine. A human's energy tends to decline over time, rather than being constant; the decline can be aggravated by all the diseases from which the gods are immune, and in general by work. We are proud of fire, but too much like it: a man's stomach and his wife's require constant fuel, to top up their energy. And men must expend almost as much energy on creating their fuel in the first place. One type of work is agriculture, which brings wine, bread, and vegetables: this activity of planting seeds and waiting for them to reappear is counterbalanced by a desire to plant sperm in a woman's womb, but that only produces more mouths to feed. The other type of work is animal husbandry, which brings dairy and dead flesh to eat. Meanwhile, the gods receive essence of bone, the part of the animal which does not decay, and can also enjoy nectar and ambrosia regardless of its nutritional value.

Prometheus is a trickster and a fixer. This is a character-type which mythmakers all over the world have credited with shaping their culture, not by the power which a god can use, but by versatility and ingenuity. But according to Hesiod,

Prometheus was not ingenious enough. After him, we are and are defined by what we eat, and by the very fact that we have to – we are mortal.

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